

## [Fair Booking Agency]

Accession no.

W 3644

Date received

10/10/40

Consignment no.

1

Shipped from

Wash. Office

Label

Amount

11p

WPA L. C. PROJECT UNIT

Form [md;] 3

Folklore Collection (or Type)

Title Fair booking agency

Place of origin Chicago, Illinois Date 4/1/39

## Library of Congress

Project worker Alfred O. Phillipp

Project editor

Remarks

W 3644

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

[?]

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Alfred O. Phillipp

ADDRESS 144th. St. & Ridgeway Ave., Midlothian, Ill.

DATE April 1 , 1939

SUBJECT "FAIR BOOKING AGENCY.

Jun 14 1939

## Library of Congress

1. Date and time of interview April 8. 1939 - 7.49 p. m.
2. Place of interview Midlothian, Ill.
3. Name and address of informant Eddy H. B. Kendall, Midlothian, Ill.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. None. He's a neighbor.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you None
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

A small cottage at 144th St. & Lawndale Ave. in Midlothian, Ill. Four room on first floor, and a small attic. House furnishings typical of middle-class American, Parlor has a piano, table, chairs, floor lamp, and carpet, the bedroom contains a bed.

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

FORM B

Personal History of Informant

AMERICAN FOLKSTUFF

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Alfred O. Philipp

ADDRESS 144th St. & Ridgeway Ave., Midlothian, Ill.

## Library of Congress

DATE April 13, 1939

SUBJECT "FAIR BOOKING AGENCY."

NAME OF INFORMANT Eddye H. B. Kendall

1. Ancestry Irish
2. Place and date of birth Ohio, 1891
3. Family Wife and six children
- 4 . Places lived in, with dates Midlothian for past 12 years.
5. Education, with dates Educated in a Military Academy in Ohio
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates Learned telegraph operating. Later went into the "employment game." Now works part time in an employment agency in Chicago, 174 W. Washington St.,
7. Special skills and interests All around office man. Special interests - making money
8. Community and religions activities Is Precinct Committee man (Dem.) and member of Catholic Church
9. Description of informant About 5' 8" in height. Weight 185 lbs. Has an artificial leg (right), other foot cut off near ankle. From Hopping freight train while a kid in Ohio. Smooth shaven. Loud voice. Corpulent.
10. Other Points gained in interview

## Library of Congress

You are perhaps familiar with the routine work conducted in a general employment agency in Chicago. Maybe you've seen a scuzz barge into a gyp joint and slip Jesse James a saw-and-a-half for a slug job, and being tagged a v. n. t. the placement clerk starts pumping and soon has him doing his song and dance, so - Hey? What am I talking about? My gosh, do I have to explain everything? Oh well -

A "scuzz" is an applicant with no vocation, although not necessarily a common laborer. A "sawbuck" being a ten-dollar bill, a "saw-and-a-half" in consequence becomes fifteen dollars. A "slug" is \$1.00 in U. S. currency (one buck to you) and so a "slug job" is a position paying a salary of one dollar per hour. The placement clerk has a card containing code letters indicating the alleged merits of the applicant, and "v. n. t." denotes "very neat type." "Pumping," or "to pump," is telephone solicitation. "Song and dance" is the applicants' personal interview with the prospective employer. So there.

There are other Chicago employment agencies, licensed as such by the state of Illinois, that are less familiar to the general public. These are the various theatrical booking offices. And for today's lesson is "how to get the dough" we will devote ourselves exclusively to the "fair booking agency" in all its wily and devious manifestations. The particular clinic in which we will conduct our research is the -BARNES-CARRUTHERS FAIR BOOKING ASSOCIATION - occupying the entire fifth floor of the Grand Opera House Building, at 121 North Clark St.

This veteran firm is the sole survivor of a long list of fair booking agencies that flourished in Chicago during the "good old days," before 2 Major Bowes and the vaudeville agents horned in. There was the World Amusement Service, Ethel Robinson Agency, the W. V. M. A. Fair Dept. (a Keith-Orpheum affiliate), the United Fairs Booking Association, the Weyerson Amusement Company, the Earl Girdella Agency, the Joe Bren Productions, and various others. This was in the pre-depression era when hundreds of county fairs throughout the middle west had gobs of filthy lucre to squander, and fair booking agencies

## Library of Congress

were created by God for the express purpose of relieving the rustic of his burden of greenbacks.

It was customary for a county fair association to hold a meeting in January or February of each year, at which meeting they voted appropriations for their fair, which would be held the following autumn. Let us assume the fair had voted ten thousand dollars for races, premiums, and free attractions. This is merely an example, of course, by way of illustration. The ten thousand dollars would perhaps be distributed as follows: Three thousand as purses for the harness races; two thousand to be cut up into a number of prizes for the best corn, cows, beans, bulls, lettuce, lambs, and other agricultural products of the county; and five thousand for "free attractions" i. e. - the acrobatic, aerial, and animal acts that perform between races on a platform in front of the grand stand. This free attraction money was the grand prize for which the Chicago fair booking agencies competed furiously.

Each fair booking agency had a number of circus or novelty acts signed up for the fair season, usually from about August 15. to October 15th., and the acts were guaranteed a minimum number of weeks' work, most contracts specifying at least eight or ten weeks to be played within the three-month period. Each agency thus had for its objective the peddling of its own acts to the greatest number of fairs possible, for the largest price obtainable. Unlike the agencies booking theatres the fair booking agencies do not operate on a commission basis. The agency signs up a man and woman aerial team at a salary ranging from \$175.00 to \$250.00 per week, and then sells the act to the fair for every possible dollar above these figures that the most persistent high pressure salesmanship can squeeze out of a sometime gullible fair secretary. An act signed up with a Chicago booking agency for \$200.00 a week will frequently sell to the fair for \$400.00. (Yep, that's one-hundred-percent commission. Did I hear you crack about state laws governing employment agencies? Aw, forget it, what's a law or two among friends.

## Library of Congress

The terms of a contract between the agency and the act is a matter of strict privacy. And no "regular" act would even think of divulging its contents, at least to the secretary of the fair or any member of the fair committee. In the above instance the fair secretary, at the conclusion of the fair, pays the act its presumed salary of \$400.00. The act retains its own \$200.00 (actual salary) and forwards the remaining \$200.00 to the Chicago booking agency. In cases involving large sums the acts are not trusted to bring in the swag, a trusted member of the agency coming personally to the fair grounds to collect.

The financial transactions involved in the fair booking game must have reached a staggering total during the "good" years. Consider, for example, our neighboring state of Iowa with its ninety-nine counties, each one of them running an annual County Fair. In addition there were always a vast number of State Fairs, Tri-State Fairs, Fall Festivals, etc. During the prosperous post-war years our own Illinois State Fair (held annually at Springfield, Ill.) frequently spent twenty-five thousand dollars for free attractions for a 4 single week.

The principal sales medium was the lavish Fair Catalogue issued annually. Each fair booking agency had its own profusely illustrated catalogue, exploiting the "thrilling double trapeze act," "sensational high perch act," "hazardous feats performed on the high wire," "spectacular hand-to-hand gymnasts," "Marvelous display of pole balancing," etc., etc., not forgetting that "these acts are under exclusive contract with this office." This book was essentially for rural consumption, and was calculated to amaze and astound the committee of the Gizzard County Fair, in Arkansas. A slick city promoter well versed in theatrical lore could grab off all the acts he wanted and from the curb at the W. Randolph and N. Dearborn Street corner, for practically coffee and doughnut money. Naturally the performers themselves paid for these catalogues, the prices varied slightly according to the size of the page, material, cuts used, etc., but the usual price was fifty dollars a page. The catalogues were mailed out each year to the various state and county fairs, but this sales program was also supplemented by personal contact on the part of field man from

## Library of Congress

the agency who attended banquets and meetings held by the fair men and attempted to sway the potential customer with demulcent palaver.

But enough of the drab business details. Let's turn to the acts themselves, the performers, the actual workers and producers, the primum mobile, the ostensible reason for the agencies' very existence, - aside from the purpose of making money, which, as every right thinking person knows, is a secondary consideration on the part of gentlemen who run employment agencies.

5

And so, let Benchley's Bounding Broomstick carry him where he will, our own skinny shanks will carry us across the street from the County Building, at 121 North Clark Street, into an old elevator, and up to the fifth floor, where we emerge into the spacious offices of the Barnes-Carruthers Fair Booking Association.

There is a small waiting room separated from the large main office by a low railing, and the sole furnishing of this waiting room consists of a very hard bench with a seat highly polished through continual contact with the pants of the job seeking acrobats and aerialists. There are two or three uncomfortable chairs, less highly polished, but equally hard. The low railing affords an unobstructed view of the entire main office. Near the gate sits the usual pretty girl at an information desk and switchboard. Out of sight, in smaller offices, sit E. F. Carruthers and M. H. Barnes, the heads of the firm. Sam. J. Levy, general secretary and all-around handy man, presumably has a desk somewhere; but his continual activity in every part of the office precludes the possibility of locating it. A meagre complement of clerks and stenographers completes the office personnel.

Time - the spring of 1939, which Chicago is celebrating (on April 10th.) with a snowstorm. We pour ourselves out of the elevator and into the small waiting room. I say "we" advisedly. Although I am apparently alone you are with me in spirit. (I hope.) The room



## Library of Congress

was far more crowded than is usual at this time of year. Many were performers that I knew, pals of former years; but there were a few new faces, acts that were strangers to me.

"Hello Alfredo, what are you doing here?" Paul Armento greeted me. "You've a stranger around the booking offices, aren't you?"

6

"Yeah, I just dropped in to say hellow," I answered evasively. "You're looking good. How are you tumbling these days, still got your old speed?"

"Well, I'm not exactly burning up the pad, but I can still turn over," Paul was a mighty tumbler in his day. "I'm pulling more of the easy routines now, like boranis and tinsikis; but I'm still doing backs in a swing, and I can still pick up a high full."

"Who're you working with?"

"I'm doing a three-act with a couple of kinkers. Don Ray and Joe Samuels, maybe you know 'em. Comedy acrobatic with a table rock finish."

"Say, Paul, isn't that Nick Machedon over in the corner? Used to do triple bars with his brother, - the Machedon Brothers."

"Yeah, that's Nick. He's still doing a stick act."

"Last time I worked with Nick was on the Bell Circuit," I reflected. "We toured Mexico together in 1927-28. I remember his knockout finish; somersault over the middle bar, kip-up, into giant swings, and a double away, - all in swing time. It was sure a flash routine. Can he still clear the middle bar?"

"Oh, he still manages to get from end-bar to end-bar," Paul answered. "But he's cut the somersault; just does a fly-over now. And, of course, he's slowed down. You know, Alfredo, there's so little work now that an act can't keep in trim any more."

## Library of Congress

A performer standing close beside Paul broke into the conversation. His face was vaguely familiar, but I could not recall him.

"How the hell can a performer do a good act these days, without a chance to work and keep in practise?" he demanded. His tone was decidedly bitter.

7

"All you do, day after day, is hang around agent's offices, relief stations, or the W. P. A. And yet these lousy agents still expect you to do a good act."

"Now here, ladies and gents, is a distinct and refined contribution to American literature - "lousy agents." I've heard the expression hundreds of times, but have never seen it in print. In speaking of a firm, office, or an individual agent, an actor will invariably mention the correct name. But in speaking of all agents as a class a performer will, nine times in ten, refer to them as "lousyagents", making one word of it.)

Also in the crowded room were - "Perrone & Ricardo, Sensational High Perch Act," - Paul Lorenzo, owner and manager of "The Four Lorenzos," - "Aerial Larkins", a man and woman double trap act, - Earl Wright, owner and manager of "Wright's Canines," - Hoshi Taketa, manager of a troupe of Japanese acrobats, - Gus Gerbin, of "The Six Demascos, Arabian Whirlwind Tumblers," - "Hi Hubert, Sensational Cloud Swing", - an assortment of clowns, and several artists unknown to me.

It should be stressed here that fair booking agencies do not secure employment (or engagements) for individual artists, except in such cases where the lone artist does a "single", i. e. - an act by himself. The fair agency is in the business of placing only compete acts which are ready (produced and rehearsed) to perform before the public. In the case of acrobatic troupes, or other large acts, it is only the owner or manager of the act who makes the continuous rounds of the agents' offices. Acts wherein all members work on the

## Library of Congress

commonwealth plan (splitting salaries equally) one of the partners is usually chosen to “do the business for the act.”

8

“Say, what are all these joeys (i. e. - clowns) doing here?” I asked Hubert.

“Trying to horn in on the Stadium show,” Hubert replied.

“You mean that Cirque Olympe, or so called Greater European Circus, that's going to open at the Chicago Stadium next week. Who's putting it on?”

“The Stadium Corporation itself is running the show, but I guess they're using mostly all Barnes-Carruthers acts.”

“Don't worry, old Mike Barnes has got a finger in the promotion,” asserted Nick Machedon.

“Naturally Barnes has to hustle and promote a few dates to keep his acts in chow money so they'll still be alive by the time the fair season opens,” commented Hubert.

“Yeah, its disgusting,” Paul Armento put in. “Who the hell ever heard of acts hanging around the fair booking offices at this time of the year?”

“Nobody did, until the last few years,” Nick sighed reminiscently. “Remember how we used to book fairs in the old vaudeville days? I remember I always used to sign up with Mike Barnes for the following year, I'd bring my photos, cuts, and catalogue matter up here and then forget about it. I'd go out and play vaudeville, and this office would never see me again until it was time to open on the fairs.”

“Say, do you think vaudeville will ever come back?” a young chap inquired innocently.

“Aw, for, - wh - aw, for Christ's sake!” snorted Hubert disgustedly, as he strode across the room and slumped over the rail.

"By the way," I interposed, "they don't give you a guarantee in the contracts any more, do they?"

"No fair office does, not any more," Gus Gerbin stated. "A fair contract to-day means only one thing. It gives the office you sign up with the exclusive right to sell and handle your act during the fair season. And if they only manage to sell you for two weeks you can't go anywhere else and look for work. All the fair contracts issued to-day are one-sided. They tie up the act, but don't obligate the office in any way."

"Yeah, but what to hell can you do about it?" asked Enos Perrone, hopelessly.

The young chap came up for another attempt.

"Listen, you guys, no kidding. I'm serious," he insisted. " Do you think vaudeville will ever come back?"